

Improving Student Outcomes through Connection- based Learning

by Linda Thompson
VP of Product &
Student Learning



The mental health solution that prepares students for learning success.

Students who are more connected with others achieve better academic and mental health outcomes, according to the CDC.

We partner with schools to assess how connected students are and teach skills to build healthy relationships.



About the Author.

With a life-long focus on social impact, Linda Thompson taught students in grades K-8 for twenty years. Her passion for youth mental health and well-being extends back to high school, where she created a peer-counseling group for students facing critical family challenges. Linda started her teaching career in schools on the Lower East Side, Harlem and the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She later taught at the Aaron Academy Middle School in NYC, a strengths-based school for students facing developmental and learning challenges. Before coming to Robin, Linda worked at the Brick Church and School for 9 years, raising over \$30 million, including funds to support education, housing and mental health services, for hundreds of youth.

Linda holds a Bachelor's Degree in Economics from the University of Michigan, a Master's Degree in Inclusive Education and Special Education from Columbia University, a 2-year Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion from Cornell University, and is a Doctoral Candidate in Educational Technology at William Howard Taft University.

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONNECTION- BASED LEARNING

When I taught middle school special education, I often taught scripted interactional behaviors to students whose cognitive development did not lead to a natural understanding of social cues. I co-taught these skills with our school counselors. As we taught these scripted interactions such as how to read facial expressions, how our tone of voice affects conversation, and expected versus unexpected signals, I frequently thought that my own middle school daughter also could have benefited from some of these lessons.

Explicit instruction that teaches students how to interact in order to meaningfully connect with others is a greater need than ever before. Many students who spent substantial time outside of school during the COVID pandemic missed critical periods of school-based interaction; this impacted their ability to connect with peers and adults.



Knowing that school connections are critical to school outcomes - including attendance levels, grades and graduation rates (CDC, 2022) as well as improved mental health outcomes (U.S. Surgeon General's Office, 2023) - it is critical that we explicitly teach skills that help students build relationships. These skills include:

- Communication
- Self-confidence
- Self-management
- Resiliency
- Conflict resolution
- Decision-making
- Stress management
- Perspective-taking

Connection-based learning happens through our interactions with others. As we know from Piaget's detailed studies of child development, children learn both experientially (learning by doing) and socially (watching and interacting with others). Whether we are learning to ride a bike, learning to read, or learning economic theory, our education can be enhanced through interaction with others. Connection-based learning is an educational philosophy embodied in Robin's educational program that focuses on building students' mental health, belonging, and ability to learn through explicit instruction and practice of relationship-building skills.

Connection-based learning is academic learning that explicitly teaches relationship-building skills. These skills not only support student learning but also improve their ability to connect with others outside of the classroom; this is proven to lead to better academic and mental health outcomes.



CONNECTION- BASED LEARNING IN PRACTICE

Connection-based learning in schools occurs daily through activities such as morning meetings, think-pair-share, stations, group projects, debates, and study groups. In these activities, students learn through interactions that are linked to the concepts being taught. However, this learning does not usually teach the skills for the interaction itself in an explicit way. For instance, group projects may be assigned and students instructed to work together, but the students have not been taught how to succeed in these interactions.

Connection-based learning teaches students their own strengths and challenges and how to deal with the frustrations that may occur from differing points of view.

In order for students to achieve their best academic and mental health outcomes, they must learn how to form connections and build relationships with others in their school, home and future work environments.

Connection-based learning teaches and incorporates unbiased, non-judgemental learning. Achieving competency is the focus of traditional learning programs, and many schools work hard to incorporate advanced teaching practices. However, many of the best teaching practices may cause communication patterns that lead to stressful

situations. For instance, project-based learning can result in difficult group project interactions, hampering learning and causing some students to shut-down or lose focus.

The best connection-based learning occurs when students are not afraid of failure; they understand how to express their opinions without feeling judged or judging others. Students can navigate disagreements, build confidence in their own social skills and understand that each person's perspective comes from their own experiences. They learn how to ask questions, listen and take time to process information.

Connection-based learning teaches metacognitive skills to help students understand their own feelings, which can impact the way they think and communicate, and how their own behavior patterns affect themselves and others.

Connection-based learning is proven to positively impact all academic subject areas. This means that all teachers can teach connection-based learning skills, giving their students tools to optimize their learning. For instance, explicitly teaching communication and conflict resolution skills can help students navigate and mitigate stress when engaging in group work or projects.

GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE THAT CONNECTION WITH OTHERS IMPROVES STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Studies have shown that students who feel connected to members of their school community are more likely to have better attendance, higher grades, and higher test scores (American Psychological Association, 2014). In addition, a longitudinal study by Tomek et al. (2016) showed that feelings of school connectedness in middle school affected student outcomes in high school and were “a significant predictor of enrollment in the last 2 years of high school” (p. 9). In contrast, Sampasa-Kanyinga, et al. (2019) found that students’ lack of connection correlated with lower academic performance in both middle school and high school students. Their findings also indicated a negative correlation between social media use and school connectedness.

These studies support earlier findings that higher levels of school connection are correlated with higher attendance, higher test scores, and higher academic achievement overall (Niehaus, et al., 2012) and are directly related to the quality of their mental health (Jones et al., 2022). For these reasons, educators’ focus on connection-based skills is critical to student outcomes.

Project-based learning, where students actively co-construct their learning through group work, is an effective teaching strategy that has been proven to heighten engagement and support collaborative learning (Reid-Griffin, et al., 2022). Eisenbach and Augusta (2022) showed that other methods of collaborative learning, like a virtual book discussion, also improve engagement. In that study, students worked in small groups guided by preservice teachers, where they created



videos for each other in an ongoing back-and-forth collaboration about the book they were reading. The activity showed that students developed connections with each other that not only resulted in a feeling of community, but also built excitement around their collaborative learning (Eisenbach & Augusta, 2022).

Following the program, the students completed a survey that indicated they found the process more engaging than usual English Language Arts (ELA) reading activities. The researchers specifically referenced the benefits of “promoting speaking and listening skills that are part of the ELA curriculum but may not be explicitly taught or assessed in the classroom” (Eisenbach & Augusta, 2022, p. 11). In short, by explicitly helping the students build the skills to connect with each other, this activity had a beneficial impact on academic performance.

While project-based learning is shown to increase engagement and self-efficacy during learning, teachers and parents know that many students struggle during group projects. This is supported by research. Reid-Griffin, et al. (2022) indicate that many students showed a lack of confidence in “team-related tasks” during project-based learning activities.

Additionally, a study by Hussein (2021) found that students need an understanding mindset, a supportive spirit and an “openness to new insights and ideas” to collaborate successfully (p. 16). The challenges students face during project-based learning can be addressed by explicitly teaching the roles, responsibilities, mindsets, and skills associated with collaborative learning. In this way, schools can help students excel in the group project setting. This improves their academic outcomes and their mental health.

Connection-based Learning aligns with U.S. Surgeon General’s National Strategy for Schools

Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



2023

The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

School administrators and leaders, boards of education, boards of trustees, teachers, parent teacher associations, state departments of education, and online learning platforms can all play a role.

- **Develop a strategic plan for school connectedness and social skills with benchmark tracking.**

This could include providing regular opportunities and spaces for students to develop social skills and strengthen relationships, and the adoption of evidenced-based practices leveraging elements of the CDC Framework: Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child.³¹⁰ Strategies to enhance connectedness may include promoting quality adult support from family and school staff, peer-led programs, and partnerships with key community groups.

- **Build social connection into health curricula,** including up-to-date, age-appropriate information on the consequences of social connection on physical and mental health, key risk and protective factors, and strategies for increasing social connection.
- **Implement socially based educational techniques** such as cooperative learning projects that can improve educational outcomes as well as peer relations.³¹¹
- **Create a supportive school environment** that fosters belonging through equitable classroom management, mentoring, and peer support groups that allow students to lean on one another and learn from each other’s experiences.

ADULTS ALSO LEARN THROUGH CONNECTION-BASED LEARNING



Research has shown that when people learn together they tend to learn better. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a common form of adult connection-based learning. According to Owens & Valesky (2022), these teams of professionals, often teachers, learn from each other by participating in intentional discussion of strategies and techniques, demonstrating these techniques for each other, cycling through specific roles, and providing structured demonstrations of their strategies and techniques with others while receiving and giving feedback with time for reflection.

Research has shown that the most effective professional learning communities receive training on how the group is told to function and interact (Owens & Valesky, 2022). Members learn how to successfully connect and learn from each other. This is an example of how explicit training in connection-based learning has been shown to be effective at any age.

Further, connection-based learning programs that include the adults in a school community, including teachers and families, can teach these skills to all members of the community, so that the adults in school and at home can learn to uplift and empower every learner in the community.

CONNECTION-BASED LEARNING SUPPORTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE, COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITIES

Connection-based learning intentionally teaches the tools for learning through connection, including specific skills that foster self-empowerment, develop perspective-taking, enable conflict resolution, and build personal and community resilience. Crucially, this enables practice of the skills so they become second nature when facing real challenges. This can be achieved by incorporating lessons that teach students to:

- Describe their unique identity and develop greater self-acceptance
- Practice effective and respectful communication techniques
- Grow in their ability to understand differing perspectives
- Contribute to collective well-being through empathy in action
- Engage in de-escalation strategies when necessary

Using these skills, the learning community can then intentionally use positive interaction to improve the learning of all students, regardless of ability.

Moreover, once students start learning and incorporating these relationship-building skills into their daily lives, they establish and foster deeper connections. For instance, teaching students how to develop and practice empathy and perspective-taking connection skills teaches students to think about and understand what someone else may be feeling, thinking and experiencing.

This will, in turn, help improve communication and strengthen their relationships with their peers, teachers, staff and others in the school community, cultivating a positive school climate where everyone feels like they belong as a valued member of the community.

These practices set the stage for an environment where students are ready to learn and feel supported to grow and thrive.



OUR COMMITMENT TO CONNECTION- BASED LEARNING



Founding Robin psychiatrist Dr. Edward N. Hallowell believes that human connection is the foundation for good mental health and a fulfilling life (Hallowell, 2001). His research is further supported by studies showing that how students feel about their connections to peers, family, school and community significantly affects their school and life outcomes (U.S. Surgeon General's Office, 2022; CDC, 2022). **Explicitly teaching students the skills they need to cultivate positive connections with others helps students improve their mental health and achieve stronger learning outcomes.** By explicitly teaching these relationship-building skills, we provide students with preventative Tier 1 and Tier 2 mental health support.

We are deeply committed to helping students with their mental health and well-being. Robin utilizes a Connection Diagnostic Assessment© (CDA) that provides data to educators regarding students' sense of belonging and well-being by measuring the degree to which students feel connected to themselves and others. The results

of the diagnostic indicate a tailored series of lessons and activities to address the challenges the students are facing. This framework provides a comprehensive yet tailored approach that functions as part of a multi-tiered system of supports.



37%

**increase in feeling
connected at school**



22%

**increase in healthy
peer relationships**

Students learn communication skills, self-regulation, perspective-taking, growth mindset, goal-setting, and how to deal with anxiety, negative self-talk and social media challenges. They also learn how to think about their self-image and goals. These skills are taught through a metacognitive, coach-practice methodology that encourages practice during everyday, real-life challenges. Through these evidence-based, positive practices, the Robin community of educators empowers students to build connections, improve their mental health, and learn more effectively.

Read our [Improving Retention and Creating a Culture of Belonging](#) white paper to learn more.

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Product Solutions

4.84

48 Students

Strengths

- 🔄 Reflection
- 🧠 Growth Mindset
- 🌱 Self-care
- 🧘 Mindfulness

Growth Areas

- 🗣️ Communication
- 👥 Relationship Skills
- 🔍 Problem-Solving

Thompson Academy 7th Grade Profile.

Linda Thompson
7th Grade Teacher

I feel comfortable with the amount of pressure I feel.

I feel comfortable asking for help.

Recommended Lessons

Measuring Connection

ASSIGN

A Mindful Moment

ASSIGN

Food for Thought

ASSIGN

*representative visualization

Proud to be a
Robin
School

Tier 1 & 2 Curriculum

Created by educators, Robin's lessons and resources are plug-and-play and have been proven to increase well-being, healthier relationships and feelings of belonging.

Connection Diagnostic Assessment[®]

An easily administered, 20-question student assessment that measures the degree to which students feel connected and provides actionable data for educators.

Live Coaching for Adults

Experienced educators and mental health experts provide experiential, evidence-based skill-building for educators, staff and parents.

Tailored Action Plan

Schools receive a tailored set of recommendations to address student challenges informed by the Connection Diagnostic Assessment[®].

“I saw some amazing changes - like my kids respectfully talking to one another about how they feel without my help, and making better choices. I am so glad we did this. It really made a difference.”

Stephanie Butler, Martin J. Gottlieb Day School

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